Editorial

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active learning in higher education

Vol 7(1): 5–7
DOI: 10.1177/1469787406061139
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As educators, we are participants in higher education in one way or another. However, 'participate' has various meanings, some of which do not necessarily suggest that we do so either actively or positively, or with a sense of engagement. The UK is currently embarked on widening participation, that is, encouraging those from underrepresented sectors of society to undertake studies at university level. We hope that this means more than merely join, have something to do with or be associated with (three of the meanings of participate, as listed in the Oxford Thesaurus) university-level studies. We would hope that, whether as learners or educators, we do more than merely appear, in body, but instead that we participate in the sense that we engage, get involved, contribute to, share in and play a part/role in higher education more fully, that is, in mind and spirit too, as these five other meanings of participate suggest. How much or how little our learners engage in the experience is to some extent shaped by the learning environment that we help to create in our classrooms. This issue takes as its theme how both we and our learners participate, or not, in various activities.

The supervisory process at doctoral level is the focus of the first article, entitled 'Superqual: A tool to explore the initial expectations of PhD students and supervisors'. In this, Mario Hair says that although we have put much effort into improving the teaching of generic research skills, how researchers participate, or not, in the supervisory process is dependent to a great extent on the expectations that both supervisor and supervisee have. If this relationship – long and for many reasons particularly complex – is to thrive (or survive), then the success or otherwise of these supervisory meetings hinges on appropriate participation. The simple-to-use instrument described in this article has been developed in order that each may better understand the expectations not only of the other, but of themselves. In the second article, entitled 'The "Millionaire" method for encouraging participation', Wendy Beekes paints the all too familiar picture of the classroom in which many learners, for a variety of reasons, are reluctant to participate in discussion. For those of us who teach large classes (by this I mean 300 or more students), it is truly heartening to read of something which in addition to increasing participation has also proved 'very effective for breaking up the sessions and maintaining student interest'. The

author comments that the Personal Response System (PRS) designed for such participation is not widely used in UK universities; if the experiences described in the article are mirrored elsewhere, this looks set to change. I, for one, feel enthused enough to try it out.

We, as educators, 'play a pivotal role as scholars and leaders in teaching and learning, and [need to provide] a flourishing and safe classroom environment to encourage and nurture creativity and innovation', says Adela McMurray, author of the third article. Entitled 'Teaching action research: The role of demographics', she says that action research 'may be viewed as "teaching thinking"'. Her comprehensive yet accessible overview covers scientific methods and thinking and how we hold and share meanings ('information') and how creativity might be hindered by our 'mental ruts'. Whilst no one could disagree that our role is pivotal, providing the environment needed is, like so much, easier said than done. There is usually little in the way of learner participation when it comes to assessing the work that we have set them. As educators, we normally mark their work and then provide written (or perhaps oral) feedback to them on how well (or not) they performed the task. Too rarely, in higher education in the UK at least, do we ask learners themselves to mark their own work and/or those of their peers. How they do so, when marking essays, is the subject of the fourth article, entitled 'Self-, peer- and teacher-assessment of student essays' by Sari Lindblom-Ylänne et al. In the study reported, it seems that there are many challenges that our learners face which impact on whether we are to consider its adoption in our own classrooms. Participation in continuous professional development (CPD) for us, as educators, is high on the agenda in today's higher education climate and so the fifth article, entitled 'Collaborative and reflective professional development: A pilot' is timely. In this, John Cowan and Jenny Westwood describe the use of journalling in order to reflect on what they did or did not do in their professional development as educators. Whilst appreciating that any journal writer, as part of an assessed course, might be tempted to write what their assessors want to hear, as the authors readily admit, it is argued that they made 'a range of detailed and persuasive claims in respect of significant achievements in their CPD'. The theme of personal development planning (PDP) is continued in the sixth article, 'Integrating personal development and career planning: The outcomes for first year undergraduate learning', by Kathy Monks et al. Described here is how learners are aided in developing self-efficacy, self-awareness and resourcefulness by way of activities and assessment in a module on a degree programme.

Whilst the articles detailed above concern activities that our learners participate in, and we encourage them to do so, the reverse is the case for the seventh and final article, 'Evaluating an electronic plagiarism detection

service: The importance of trust and the difficulty of proving students don't cheat', by Robert Evans. With incidences of plagiarism said to be on the increase, we face what is termed a 'new plagiarism', perhaps in part attributable to the ease with which data can be accessed from electronic sources and the rise in the number of online service providers which offer, for a very small price indeed, to write any piece of coursework for any student, regardless of level, discipline or language. This is indeed a problem that we need to address. Whilst it is pleasing to read that the JISC system is useful, and that it does very well with regard to 'major or blatant plagiarism', the study revealed a noteworthy issue, that is, the difficulties not in identifying plagiarism but in the time and effort needed to prove its *absence*. If we are to use such electronic systems more widely, particularly when marking high volumes of coursework, the author suggests that we shall need to look carefully at how we use it, practically speaking, if we are not to spend an inordinate amount of time on marking and checking our learners' work. As the collecting of coursework electronically is becoming more widespread, and may indeed become the norm in the sector in the UK, this article provides essential reading for those of us who must, one way or another, decide how we are to grapple with the issues and tasks involved.

As is customary, this issue concludes with reviews of books.